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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 52/211 B of 19 December 1997, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to it at its fifty-third session on the progress made in the implementation of that resolution. In the same resolution, the General Assembly also requested the Secretary-General to report every three months during its fifty-second session on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan (UNSMA). Three progress reports have been submitted: the first on 17 March 1998 (A/52/826-S/1998/222), the second on 19 June 1998 (A/52/957-S/1998/532) and the third on 2 October 1998 (A/53/455-S/1998/913).

2. The present report, which covers developments since the issuance of the Secretary-General's report of 14 November 1997 (A/52/682-S/1997/894), is also submitted in response to requests by the Security Council for regular information on the main developments in Afghanistan. The report describes the principal events that have taken place in Afghanistan, including the major military and political developments and the activities of the Special Mission. It also draws attention to activities in New York, to the missions of my Special Envoy for Afghanistan and to activities in neighbouring countries.

3. On 29 December 1997, Dr. Norbert Holl completed his assignment as Head of UNSMA. Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi continues to serve as my Special Envoy for Afghanistan, while also carrying out other functions for the United Nations at my request from time to time. In conjunction with the Department of Political Affairs, he oversees and guides the activities of UNSMA, including coordination and cooperation in humanitarian and other United Nations activities in Afghanistan. He also undertook political initiatives, as appropriate, aimed at

bringing peace to Afghanistan during his two visits to Afghanistan and neighbouring countries in March/April and September/October 1998.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

A. Military situation

4. The period under review witnessed wide fluctuations in the military balance on the ground, with the Taliban taking control of most of northern and central Afghanistan, which used to be under the control of the United Front (UF). After the breakdown of the intra-Afghan talks in the joint Steering Committee for the Ulema Commission and the subsequent abandonment of the process by the Taliban, the Taliban and the UF forces reneged on their commitment, made during the Steering Committee talks, not to launch major military offensives against each other. Despite repeated international appeals to the contrary, including by the United Nations, the factions resumed fighting, particularly in the north of Afghanistan.

5. Forces under Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud intensified their rocket attacks on Kabul International Airport. According to UNSMA's count, a total of more than 130 rockets landed in the Kabul airport area during the period from 1 June to 20 October 1998. The rockets sometimes missed their targets and hit neighbouring areas with severe consequences for innocent civilian populations and installations. On 20 and 21 September, nine Luna rockets landed in a residential area in the city of Kabul, reportedly killing more than 190 people. As a result of the rocket attacks, both the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) suspended their flights to Kabul. ICRC resumed its flights to Kabul on 27 October 1998.

6. At the beginning of June, the UF forces, under General Abdul Rashid Dostum, leader of the Jumbesh party, launched an attack on the Taliban forces in the Gormach-Bala Murgab area in the north-western province of Badghis, near the border with Turkmenistan. Aided by local Taliban defectors, General Dostum's forces pushed the Taliban beyond the Murghab River down towards Qala-i-Naw, with the presumed intention of driving the Taliban out of Badghis Province. The Taliban repelled the attack and eventually managed to hold the Jumbesh forces at the original front lines.

7. However, the tide of battle changed in mid-July when the Taliban launched a well-organized offensive against UF. On 12 July, in a swift move, the Taliban overwhelmed the defending Jumbesh forces and captured Maimana, the provincial capital of Faryab. They went on to capture Shiberghan, the provincial capital of Jozjan and General Dostum's stronghold, on 2 August. Mazar-i-Sharif, the only major Afghan city not under the control of the Taliban, fell to the militia on 8 August. The Taliban continued their thrust and captured the city of Bamyan in central Afghanistan on 13 September, completing their sweep of the whole of northern Afghanistan, with the exception of a few provinces in the north-east.

8. As the Taliban continued their military advances in northern Afghanistan, tensions between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic of Iran began to loom along the Iranian-Afghan border. The situation deteriorated sharply when the

Taliban acknowledged on 10 September that their troops, acting independently, had killed eight Iranian diplomats and one journalist who were at the Iranian Consulate-General in Mazar-i-Sharif when the Taliban captured the city. After initial military exercises on the border involving 70,000 troops in early September, the Islamic Republic of Iran announced, on 12 September, that it would conduct further military manoeuvres involving an additional 200,000 troops. To counter this, the Taliban moved some 10,000 fighters to the border areas from other frontlines. Tensions still exist between the two sides at the time of the writing of the present report.

9. In spite of their preoccupation with the situation along the Iranian-Afghan border, the Taliban were still bent on wiping out the remaining areas controlled by UF, such as Commander Massoud's last stronghold north of Kabul, before the onset of the winter. However, their multi-pronged offences against him, launched on 10 October, proved futile against the stiff opposition and tactical manoeuvres displayed by the Jamiat forces. Instead, on 17 October, the Jamiat forces recaptured Taloqan, the capital of Takhar Province, which had fallen to the Taliban on 11 August.

10. Throughout the period, there have been many allegations as well as credible reports of external, mostly covert, interference for both sides of the war. One of the stark examples of such outside intervention was the recent interception by the Kyrgyz authorities of a full train-load of weapons and ammunition said to be destined for UF factions. Also, sources reported to UNSMA on sorties of unmarked aircraft to UF airbases and heavy military supplies ferried across the Oxus River to reinforce Massoud forces. The Taliban were in no way immune to similar allegations. There have been persistent reports of massive amounts of support, in terms of military equipment, know-how and funds, that the militia has allegedly received from outside sources. UNSMA has also received reports of large numbers of non-Afghans, mostly of Pakistani origin, said to be engaging in all aspects of fighting alongside the Taliban. UNSMA interviewed a number of captured fighters in Bamyan, all of whom admitted to being Pakistani, but without affiliation to any official institution of the Pakistani State.

B. Political situation

11. During most of the year, the internal political situation was characterized by two factors: the fragmentation of the UF forces and the strengthening of the Taliban. The fragmentation among the factions of UF led not only to the inability of the alliance to achieve any common political objectives (even preserving security in Mazar-i-Sharif in order to allow United Nations and non-governmental organization aid workers to bring assistance to the population), but also ultimately to their inability to defend their territories against a well-planned Taliban offensive. The conquest of Mazar-i-Sharif by the Taliban forced nearly all the alliance leaders to flee the country, leaving Massoud as the only leader still controlling a homogeneous piece of territory in Afghanistan who continued to resist the Taliban. Even during the Steering Committee talks on an Ulema Commission (26 April-3 May 1998), differences among the UF leaders were evident, with some members of the UF delegation seeming more disposed to be flexible than others. This division among partners has been one of the main barriers to the conduct of effective peace talks with the Taliban.

12. The Taliban, on the contrary, have been able to maintain their unity and now control most of the country. They have improved their military skills and have greatly benefitted, both militarily and politically, from the simplicity of their chain of command under the leadership of Mullah Mohammad Omar. However, the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif and Bamyan to the Taliban led to grave violations of human rights, according to well-placed sources, including the killings in the Consulate-General of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These murders were strongly condemned by the international community. The Secretary-General issued a statement condemning the killings on 11 September and the Security Council a presidential statement to the same effect on 15 September (S/PRST/1998/27). As indicated above, the murders provoked a very serious increase in tensions on the Iranian-Afghan border. Moreover, Taliban advances on the borders of central Asian republics have caused much alarm among those countries, which fear the possible spread of a fundamentalist brand of Islam in their territories.

13. The presence in Afghanistan of Mr. Osama bin Laden and the allegations of his implication in the bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania led to a retaliatory missile attack on 20 August 1998 by the United States against targets in Afghanistan said to be centres of training for international terrorist activities. On 21 August, two UNSMA officials were deliberately shot at and severely wounded in Kabul; one, Lt. Col. Carmine Calo (Italy), later died from his wounds. It was then decided to withdraw all United Nations agency workers from Afghanistan until the security situation proved conducive to their return. All the above-mentioned events conspired to create a very tense atmosphere, which affected the entire region. Consequently, I took the decision, supported by members of the "six plus two" group, to send my Special Envoy to the region with a view to advancing the goals of the "Points of Common Understanding" (A/53/455, annex) agreed during a six plus two group meeting at the Foreign Minister level on 21 September. A report on the activities of the Special Envoy during his mission is given below.

14. Three other major developments during the past year must be highlighted:

(a) The failed meeting of the Ulema Commission (April-May), which jeopardized intra-Afghan talks;

(b) The situation of high tension on the border between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Afghanistan (August-October);

(c) The attack on UNSMA personnel which led to the United Nations withdrawing all its international staff from Afghanistan. This, together with various events which occurred during the year between the Taliban and the United Nations or non-governmental organizations, created a need for both the United Nations and the Taliban to reassess their practical arrangements for cooperation on the ground.

C. The meeting of the Ulema Commission in Islamabad

15. Originally a Taliban idea endorsed by Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and accepted by Afghanistan President Burhanuddin Rabbani in January 1998, the meeting took shape as a proposed Ulema Commission to settle the Afghan conflict in the light of the Sharia Islamic legal code. My Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi, accompanied by Ambassador Mokhtar Lamani, the Permanent Observer of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to the United Nations, negotiated the arrangements to convene the Steering Committee in late April with Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani and other UF leaders who gathered in Ashkabad in late March, as well as with Mullah Mohammad Rabbani, leader of the Taliban Shura in Kabul. Ambassador Bill Richardson, the then United States Permanent Representative to the United Nations, visited Afghanistan on 17 April 1998 and both the Taliban and UF gave him their commitment on a number of issues, including a commitment not to initiate any military offensives during the Islamabad meeting.

16. Opened on 26 April 1998 under the auspices of the United Nations and OIC, the meeting generated expectations that an agreement for peace in Afghanistan would be forthcoming. Unfortunately, after three days of intense debate, the meeting foundered on the definition of the word "ulema" and had to be adjourned sine die on 3 May. The Committee failed to agree on any other item of the agenda and the negotiations finally collapsed when the Taliban side announced its decision on 17 May to withdraw from the talks and abandon the exercise altogether.

17. The collapse of the Steering Committee meeting led to renewed fighting in Kunduz and north of Kabul, with increased rocket launches on the city and in Badghis Province. Non-military Afghan groups and individuals nevertheless continued their efforts throughout the year to develop, in various forms, a process that would allow for the restoration of peace in Afghanistan.

D. Tension on the Iran/Afghanistan border and alleged violations of human rights

18. Following the Taliban takeover of Mazar-i-Sharif on 8 August 1998, the Islamic Republic of Iran announced that 10 diplomats and one journalist, all stationed at the Iranian Consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif, were missing. On 10 September, the Taliban announced the recovery of nine bodies, consisting of eight diplomats and one journalist. The Taliban said that these Iranians had been killed on the first day of the Taliban's occupation of the city by Taliban soldiers acting without any instructions. Two diplomats managed to escape and make their way to the Islamic Republic of Iran. The announcement of these murders led to a further escalation of tensions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Afghanistan. Media reports, quoting Iranian leaders, indicated the probability that the Islamic Republic of Iran was contemplating some sort of military response. The Taliban, on their part, began putting in place some precautionary measures, including the deployment of supplementary forces.

19. Meanwhile, very disturbing information from various sources reached United Nations agencies, in particular the Office of the United Nations High

Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), regarding allegations of massive human rights violations following the Taliban's occupation of Mazar-i-Sharif and the northern and central provinces of Afghanistan formerly held by UF. Testimonies received mentioned indiscriminate targeting of the Hazara community.

20. The Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan communicated these allegations to the Taliban seeking their comments and observations. In their response, the Taliban took exception to what they considered to be a one-sided accusation for the alleged human rights violations, citing a singular lack of mention in the Special Rapporteur's report of the atrocities said to have been committed against the Taliban. The United Nations is considering, on an urgent basis, a mechanism for instituting a full inquiry into all allegations of human rights violations, covering those reported in 1997, as well as the most recent ones, as soon as security and conditions permit United Nations international staff to travel and work inside Afghanistan again. A fuller treatment of this issue is contained in the section on human rights below.

E. Attack on personnel of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan and security constraints

21. On 21 August 1998, two UNSMA officials, a Political Affairs Officer and a Deputy Military Adviser, while travelling in a clearly marked United Nations vehicle, were intercepted by a vehicle bearing official Taliban markings, from which an unidentified gunman alighted and began shooting indiscriminately at the two United Nations officials. As indicated above, both were severely wounded, resulting in the death the following day of the Deputy Military Adviser, Lt. Colonel Carmine Calo (Italy). This tragic incident was the first of its kind since the establishment in May 1988 of a United Nations peace mission for Afghanistan. Together with the murder of two Afghan United Nations workers in Jalalabad, it was condemned by the Security Council and the entire international community. I have expressed my regret to the Government of Italy and have offered my personal condolences to Lt. Colonel Calo's family. The United Nations is awaiting a response from the Taliban authorities to a request for a full report, including all information about the circumstances of the attack, identities of the culprits, their motives and any ongoing judicial proceedings. The Taliban authorities so far have expressed regret at the incident and have informed the United Nations that they have arrested two suspects, identified as Pakistani nationals, in connection with this case.

22. These fatal attacks on United Nations personnel and other incidents affecting the security of United Nations workers in Afghanistan led to the withdrawal of all United Nations international staff from the country. Full reports by the Taliban on all such incidents have been made a condition for the United Nations assessment of whether or when United Nations personnel, programmes and funds should return to Afghanistan, as has the Taliban's readiness to cooperate in accordance with the full provisions of the memorandum of understanding of 13 May 1998 and of its supplementary protocol, signed between the Taliban and the United Nations on 23 October 1998.

III. ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIAL ENVOY

23. During the period under review, my Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi, undertook two missions to Afghanistan and the region: between 20 March and 15 April 1998 and between 29 September and 25 October 1998. The details of his first mission were covered in my second progress report (A/52/957-S/1998/532).

24. In late September 1998, I decided to dispatch my Special Envoy to the region for the second time this year, with a view to addressing the most urgent issues: namely the alleged mass killings of civilians following the flare-up of the fighting in northern Afghanistan and increasing tensions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Taliban. My decision was supported by the six plus two group when it adopted the points of common understanding at its Foreign Minister level meeting on 21 September (see annex to A/53/455-S/1998/913). Mr. Brahimi's mission visited six countries in all. Starting with the United Arab Emirates, the mission then proceeded to the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, then back to the Islamic Republic of Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. In Tehran, the mission was joined by an OIC delegation led by Mr. Ibrahimi Bakr, Under-Secretary-General and Special Envoy of OIC for Afghanistan. Before and after his visit to the region, Mr. Brahimi was received by the President of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan. Before departing for the region, Mr. Brahimi was also received by Prince Saud al-Faisal, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia.

25. While the mission was in Islamabad, I decided to authorize, on an exceptional basis, a one-day visit by the mission to Kandahar on 14 October for consultations with the Taliban leadership at the invitation of the supreme leader of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammad Omar. The decision was made following intensive consultations between Mr. Brahimi and a Taliban delegation headed by Mullah Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil at Islamabad on 10 and 11 October 1998, at which the Taliban gave my Special Envoy assurances that they would address seriously unresolved United Nations security concerns about the possible return of international United Nations staff to Afghanistan and, in particular, would share information on their investigation into the killing of Lt. Colonel Calo and the two local United Nations employees.

26. During his talks with Mullah Omar, Mr. Brahimi secured agreements from the Taliban leadership on the release of all the Iranians, described by the Islamic Republic of Iran as innocent truck drivers said to have been captured in Mazar-i-Sharif and subsequently transferred for detention in Kandahar. The Taliban leader also confirmed his commitment to the continued investigation by the Taliban of the killing of the Iranian diplomats and the Iranian journalist in Mazar-i-Sharif and promised that the Taliban authorities would support and cooperate with an international mission of inquiry into all circumstances surrounding the fate of the above-mentioned slain Iranians. While it was not possible to obtain a formal apology from the Taliban for the killing of the Iranian diplomats, Mullah Omar agreed to let Mr. Brahimi express, on his behalf, the Taliban's regret over the death of these Iranians and sympathy for the bereaved families. Furthermore, Mullah Omar agreed to the suggestion made by the United Nations-OIC mission that the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Taliban should meet at a responsible, political level at a mutually

agreeable time and place, such as the OIC Headquarters in Jeddah or the United Nations Offices in Geneva, Vienna or New York. Following these agreements, the United Nations, in close cooperation and coordination with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), received the 26 Iranian truck drivers from the Kandahar jails and successfully evacuated them to Tehran on 17 October 1998. The Iranian authorities subsequently notified the mission that one more of their nationals was still being held in detention by the Taliban. UNSMA and ICRC are making enquiries as to the whereabouts of this missing person.

27. Regarding human rights, Mullah Omar indicated that the Taliban authorities were ready to cooperate with an international investigation into the reported mass killings and mass graves of Taliban fighters in Mazar-i-Sharif, Dasht-i-Leli, in the jail of Bamyan and the recent claims and reports of mass killings. Mr. Brahimi also discussed with Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders in Kandahar the possibility of placing civilian monitors in key places in Afghanistan as soon as possible to deter further abuses of human rights in Afghanistan. The Taliban leaders agreed that the matter should be discussed further in talks between the United Nations and the Taliban.

28. In Tehran and Dushanbe, the mission met the UF leaders, including Professor Rabbani, Karim Khalil, leader of the Hezb-i-Wahdat, General Dostum and Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud. In addition, the mission had occasion to meet a number of accredited representatives of many Governments, individually or as members of established regional groupings, as well as representatives of various sectional Afghan interests and individual personalities.

29. The core issue of how to achieve lasting peace in Afghanistan was always at the centre of all the consultations both with the Afghan factions and leaders of the Governments concerned. In his talks with Mullah Omar, Mr. Brahimi stressed the need for the genuine establishment of a broad-based, multi-ethnic, representative government and for the creation of conditions under which all ethnic and religious groups could live in harmony. This could be done when, and only when, Afghan leaders agreed on a sound political system in which the interests of all ethnic, religious and social groups were duly reflected. Mr. Brahimi made clear to the Taliban leader that the inclusion of a few non-Pashtoon officials into their hierarchy did not necessarily make the Taliban a broad-based government, as defined by the General Assembly, the Security Council and the six plus two group. What was needed was genuine power-sharing. In their written reply, as well as in the mission's consultations with them, the Taliban made clear that they did not see any benefit in a ceasefire and claimed that their government, which included leaders from minority ethnic groups, was already a broad-based government that should be recognized by the international community and the United Nations. All UF leaders, including Commander Massoud, reconfirmed their readiness for a political settlement, but failed to show any convincing signs that they would be less divided than before. They all complained bitterly about external interference, which they considered the main reason for their defeat and the continuation of war.

30. During his second visit to Tehran, Mr. Brahimi explained to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran the agreements he had secured with the Taliban leadership. He then expressed the hope that, since most of the Iranian demands had been met, Tehran might take reciprocal steps, such as the release of a

comparable number of Taliban prisoners wherever they might be held, the withdrawal of a substantial part of Iran's troops from the border and the opening of a direct dialogue with the Taliban at a political level. The Iranian authorities assured Mr. Brahimi that they would endeavour to secure the release of Taliban prisoners by UF. However, they indicated that they were reluctant to undertake a political dialogue with the Taliban, at least until they arrested and put to trial those suspected of killing the Iranian diplomats.

31. During its stay in the central Asian republics from 21 through 24 October 1998, the mission was received by the Presidents of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, as well as by the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the three countries. These leaders, particularly those in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, were seriously apprehensive of the Taliban advances in northern Afghanistan. They took special exception to the potential threat of infiltration into their countries of the Taliban brand of Islamic fundamentalism, which they feared would inevitably destabilize their political, social and cultural foundations. They therefore expressed hopes that appropriate measures would soon be put into effect to promote a peaceful solution of the Afghan conflict through serious dialogue between the various factions. One of such measures, according to the President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, was the holding of a high-level meeting of the six plus two group in Tashkent, which, he said, must be preceded by careful preparations in order to produce concrete and substantive results. The Uzbek President had earlier issued a joint communiqué with the President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, in which the two leaders supported the convening of such a meeting with the participation of representatives of the various Afghan forces. At the time of the writing of this report, the Uzbek authorities were in consultation with other countries which are members of the six plus two group in order to prepare for such a meeting.

IV. ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIAL MISSION

32. As mandated by the General Assembly in its resolution 52/211 B, UNSMA continued its efforts to facilitate national reconciliation and reconstruction in Afghanistan and explored opportunities for bringing the factions together and starting a dialogue. During 1998, UNSMA focused its efforts on supporting the peacemaking activities of my Special Envoy, in particular the promotion of an intra-Afghan dialogue through the setting up of an Ulema Commission and in many other ways.

33. Before the shooting of the UNSMA officials on 21 August 1998, UNSMA political affairs officers and military advisers had met regularly, in Afghanistan, with leaders of Afghan factions. Throughout 1998, UNSMA remained in close touch with the Pakistani authorities in Islamabad, stressing that national reconciliation could only be achieved with the support and cooperation of neighbouring States. UNSMA was regularly informed of the progress of the Pakistan-Islamic Republic of Iran joint peace initiative undertaken by the two countries after the collapse of the Ulema Commission in June. UNSMA also kept in close contact with the diplomatic community in Islamabad, notably members of OIC and the Group of 21 countries. The role played by UNSMA, in conjunction with OIC, in organizing and managing the Ulema Commission exercise has already been described above.

34. The Special Mission also engaged in other activities. For example, it was involved in meetings of the Society for Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage, a group dedicated to preserving the cultural and historic relics of Afghanistan. UNSMA played a role in the preparation of the strategic framework for the next humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan, reinforcing its ties with humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organizations.

35. UNSMA continues to maintain useful contacts with other, non-warring Afghan factions and personalities. It supports calls by these independent Afghans for an end to the fighting and any proposals which might advance the cause of peace, including the convening of a genuine Loya Jirgah to promote a political settlement. This informal, time-honoured Afghan method for settling disputes continues to deserve the Special Mission's attention and, under appropriate conditions, its support.

V. ACTIVITIES AT THE UNITED NATIONS

36. During the reporting period, I convened the fourth and fifth meetings of the Group of 21 countries with influence in Afghanistan: the fourth on 1 June 1998, following the collapse of the Ulema Commission process; and the fifth on 29 October, following the second mission of my Special Envoy. Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, chaired the fourth meeting and Mr. Brahimi the fifth. These meetings were attended by China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Netherlands, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America and Uzbekistan, as well as by OIC.

37. At my request, the Special Envoy and the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs also held a total of seven meetings of the six plus two informal group, which comprises Afghanistan's six immediate neighbours - China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - plus the Russian Federation and the United States of America. Among those meetings was one held in New York on 21 September, for the first time at the Foreign Minister level.

38. I should like to take note with gratitude that groups of Member States, as well as individual Member States which are not members of the six plus two group but are nevertheless concerned, have been cooperating with the group in facilitating the United Nations peacemaking activities in Afghanistan. One such example is a group formed by France, Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which, together with the Russian Federation and the United States of America, have coordinated their activities with the six plus two group.

VI. HUMANITARIAN ACTIVITIES

Humanitarian situation

39. The ongoing conflict in some parts of the country continues to impede the international community's ability to respond to widespread humanitarian emergencies. This has limited access to some vulnerable populations, particularly in the central and north-eastern areas and in some cases has resulted in the loss of pre-positioned supplies, notably of food.

40. Following the temporary relocation from Afghanistan of international staff on 21 August 1998, after the two United Nations international staff members were shot in Kabul, United Nations agencies all subscribed to the "Next Steps Paper", which set out principles, strategic objectives and requirements to be met by the Afghan authorities. In the context of this paper, the United Nations and the Taliban signed a supplementary protocol on security to their memorandum of understanding of 13 May 1998. Since signing this document in October, the Taliban authorities have met a number of commitments. One of the two staff members who had been detained in Kabul was released, though the other case remains unresolved.

41. Initial steps have been taken to investigate the murder in July of two locally-recruited staff from Jalalabad and of one international staff member in Kabul in August. The United Nations has received reports on several cases of looting of equipment and supplies and on damage to United Nations property, but there is a need for additional information and evidence of effective follow-up. The Taliban must meet these outstanding commitments before the return of international staff can be considered. While ongoing United Nations programmes are continuing under the management of national staff, it has not been possible to embark on new assistance activities since September 1998.

42. Despite the temporary relocation of United Nations international staff, it has been possible to make additional progress on the provisions of the memorandum of understanding signed in May by the Taliban authorities and the United Nations. This has resulted in the establishment of a joint consultative commission and two additional commissions to deal with substantive issues related to the provision of education and health services. The fact that these commissions have not yet met limits the ability of the United Nations to respond to its commitments under this agreement, specifically in the health and education sectors. The United Nations is in the process of reviewing options for continued delivery of essential assistance in the country in the event that international staff are unable to return in the coming months.

43. A limited number of international non-governmental organizations that had withdrawn from Kabul in the face of an order to relocate to Kabul Polytechnic have chosen to return to the city and to resume some activities. This resumption has been conditional upon a process of registration with the authorities and a commitment to relocate to the Polytechnic. In some cases, the resumption of activities by non-governmental organizations in other parts of the country has also been conditional upon registration in Kabul. This issue was one of the subjects discussed in two non-governmental organization commission meetings in August 1998. Two additional commissions, one for the reopening of

sealed offices and one to oversee the relocation process, were established in October.

44. Following a request in September 1998 from the Taliban authorities to respond to humanitarian needs in Hazarajat in central Afghanistan, the United Nations has repeatedly sought permission to travel to the area by air or land. Authorization for a road mission was finally granted in early November, and a national team is en route to the area to undertake a general assessment of needs and to review access options. The provision of additional assistance will, however, require the involvement of United Nations international staff in the management of the operation, as well as credible evidence that security can be provided for supplies.

45. Reports indicate that trade and transport between Kabul, Ghazni and Hazarajat (which was subject to blockade until the takeover of the area by the Taliban) has resumed, with significant through-traffic proceeding onward to Mazar-i-Sharif. The lifting of the blockade might have a positive impact on communities' ability to sustain themselves during the winter ahead. However, it is likely that a significant proportion of families will not have the means to buy essential commodities. The World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that up to 160,000 people in the area will need some 5,300 tons of food to avert hunger during the coming winter. Unfortunately, 1,500 metric tons of food aid, as well as vehicles, disappeared from WFP warehouses in Bamyan and Yakawlang following the recent fighting in the area. WFP strongly protested these losses to the Taliban leadership.

46. In Kabul, the bulk of immediate humanitarian needs are for the moment being met by the combined programmes of WFP, ICRC and CARE, with important contributions from other agencies. This situation might be affected by further displacement and contingency plans are in place for this if needed. In addition to relief distribution in Kabul, there is concern about the impact of the withdrawal of the support of non-governmental organizations to health-care structures. Technical agencies and concerned non-governmental organizations are monitoring the situation.

47. Following the displacement of significant numbers of people from Pul-e-Khumri in northern Afghanistan during skirmishes in July, there were subsequent reports of population movements to the Kayan valley during the takeover of parts of Baghlan Province by the Taliban in August. There have been reports that up to 40,000 people may have been forced up the Kayan valley into the remote Dara and Nekba valleys in the face of advances by the Taliban. There is every reason to believe that these displaced communities will face difficulties in surviving the harsh winter in these valleys, which are sparsely inhabited and difficult to access. An international non-governmental organization is trying to arrange for the transport of 30 tons of food from Pul-e-Khumri to the area, but there may be a need for additional stocks to be brought in for the winter. These displaced families are also likely to require non-food assistance if they remain in the area. In addition, some 2,000 people have arrived in Peshawar, where reception centres have been set up by non-governmental organizations.

48. Between 1 January and 1 November 1998, a total of 86,200 Afghan refugees returned voluntarily from Pakistan with assistance from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with a further 1,600 returning from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Despite the many problems facing Afghanistan, this is the largest repatriation anywhere in the world this year and brings the total number of Afghans who have returned to 4.1 million. UNHCR's new group repatriation scheme for Afghan refugees in Pakistan accounted for 18,000 of the total. However, the scheme has been badly undermined by the unprecedented funding crisis, which has led to the suspension of all organized group repatriations for the remainder of 1998. This has meant the suspension of a number of rehabilitation projects promised to groups that were repatriated earlier in the year, thereby damaging the credibility of the scheme in the eyes of the refugees.

49. In the north-eastern Provinces of Badakhshan and Takhar, the conflict has exacerbated the vulnerability of many remote communities. There are plans to strengthen United Nations national staff in this region, with a view to needs monitoring (particularly food) in the coming months, and to prepare for relief distribution to vulnerable groups. Food continues to be brought in by WFP and others through Tajikistan, but this route could be affected by any intensification of hostilities.

50. The north-eastern region has continued to experience sporadic seismic activity following the devastating earthquakes in February and May 1998. As part of the reconstruction effort, support is being given for the rebuilding of some 15,000 homes, 10,000 of which should be completed by the end of November 1998. The non-governmental organizations involved in this programme are planning for the winterization of incomplete homes and the identification of potentially vulnerable families, which may need to relocate to adjacent areas (Kunduz or Faizabad) for the winter. Among other activities, WFP is distributing 250 kilograms of wheat to families who have rebuilt their homes in the districts of Shahr-i-Buzurgh, Rustaq and Chah Ab.

51. Despite the withdrawal of international staff, the Office of the United Nations for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan (UNOCHA) Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan has continued its operations throughout most of the country. Several independently-financed non-governmental organizations continue to face funding shortfalls owing to revised policies by some donors. The achievements of the Mine Action Programme thus far in 1998 include clearance of 23 square kilometres of mined areas, clearance of 25 square kilometres of land contaminated by unexploded ordnance, a survey of 57.5 square kilometres of mine- and unexploded ordnance-contaminated land and provision of mine awareness training to almost 500,000 Afghans. In October, the Taliban authorities formally announced a ban on the production, transfer and sale of landmines. Several confirmed or reliable reports have been received indicating that the northern alliance has continued to lay mines periodically. The full extent of new mines laid cannot yet be assessed owing to the lack of secure conditions in those areas.

52. As of 13 November 1998, some $51 million had been contributed or pledged for projects in the 1998 consolidated appeal for assistance to Afghanistan, representing one third of the appeal requirements of $157 million. In addition,

some $36 million has been contributed or pledged for non-appeal projects in 1998.

53. Despite the withdrawal of most international staff, collaborative efforts continue within the assistance community to implement principled common programming of aid activities in Afghanistan. On 10 November 1998, the first meeting of the Afghanistan Programming Body was held at Islamabad, comprising representatives from the United Nations, non-governmental organizations, ICRC, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and major donor countries, providing guidance on the preparation of the 1999 consolidated appeal, among other issues.

VII. HUMAN RIGHTS

54. The situation of human rights in Afghanistan did not improve over the past year. It has, in fact, deteriorated with regard to several aspects and remains a cause for serious concern. Of particular concern are allegations of mass killings and other serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in northern Afghanistan in 1997 and 1998, which have been committed by all sides involved in the conflict. Many of the killings have been of a retaliatory nature.

55. The atrocities committed by all parties involved in the conflict over the past two years have widened the ethnic and religious divide between different Afghan communities and have further undermined the social fabric of Afghanistan, which has been rendered fragile by almost two decades of war.

56. The situation of women and girls in Afghanistan, which has deteriorated in all areas under the control of the Taliban movement, continues to be of serious concern. Women and girls continue to be denied access to adequate health care, to all levels and types of education, to employment and at times to humanitarian assistance. In addition, a number of women and girls were reportedly abducted and raped during the tragic events which took place in northern Afghanistan in August 1998.

57. In December 1997, following the announcement of the discovery of mass graves in northern Afghanistan in November 1997, the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan visited a number of sites where persons had been buried in that part of the country. He was accompanied during the visit by a forensic expert. In his report to the Commission on Human Rights, the Special Rapporteur recommended that an investigation of the killings take place.

58. In May 1998, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) sent an exploratory mission to Afghanistan to determine the feasibility of an investigation into allegations of serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law committed in Afghanistan in the course of 1997. In the light of the mission's report, and in view of the extremely serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law reported to have taken place in 1998, the Department of Political Affairs, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and UNHCHR jointly decided to proceed

with preparations for an investigation of those reports, which will be carried out under the auspices of UNHCHR.

59. In addition, it is the intention of a number of thematic special rapporteurs of the Commission on Human Rights to undertake visits to Afghanistan within the purview of their respective mandates. A human rights adviser for technical cooperation programming has been seconded to UNOCHA.

VIII. QUESTION OF ILLEGAL DRUGS

Activities of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme

60. The pilot country programme of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) for Afghanistan has developed steadily but slowly. It is based upon a UNDCP commitment to fund development activities in specific poppy-growing areas in exchange for the Taliban's agreement: (a) not to permit cultivation of opium poppy into new areas; (b) to allow UNDCP to survey the opium poppy crop; and (c) to take action against trafficking of illicit drugs and for the destruction of illicit laboratories. Development activities have been agreed with counterpart authorities and beneficiary communities through separate drug control action plans for one district in Nangarhar Province (Shinwar) and for three districts in Qandahar Province (Ghorak, Majwand and Kakhrez). The former foresees poppy being eliminated by the year 2001, the latter by the year 2000.

61. Activities for the reduction of the poppy crop continued within existing constraints, focusing on rehabilitation of small irrigation systems, canal desilting and the maintenance of canal structures, restoration of a power station, development of community service infrastructures such as health centres and the introduction of new improved seeds to farmers as substitutes for the opium poppy. Most of this work was undertaken in Nangarhar Province in the east, where conditions permitted sustained interventions. In Qandahar, the other operational zone for the pilot programme, activities were implemented more haltingly, the most significant intervention being the provision of equipment to restore the Qandahar electrical sub-station. To date, a total of 71 sub-projects have been approved for the entire programme. Of these, 54 relate directly to poppy crop reduction.

62. The Programme's monitoring and evaluation module, which is central to development of a knowledge base on narcotics in Afghanistan, became fully operational in 1998. Studies commenced at the farmer/trader/community level and the fifth annual opium poppy survey of Afghanistan was undertaken (its main results are outlined below). The three drug control coordination units of Nangarhar, Kabul and Qandahar continue to deliver according to the workplans.

63. The pilot programme's results have to date been mixed, largely because of the highly volatile situation currently prevailing in Afghanistan. In 1998, the overall area under opium poppy cultivation increased by 9 per cent to 63,674 hectares. Despite the agreement reached with the Taliban, opium poppy cultivation was found to have spread to several new districts in the areas under their control. Aside from the burning of 2 metric tons of opium in Jalalabad in

June, no enforcement action has been reported by the Taliban authorities against the production and trafficking of opiates. As for specific project target districts, there was a drop in opium cultivation in Ghorak district of Qandahar, but an increase in cultivation in the districts of Kakhrez and Majwand. In Shinwar district, opium cultivation was almost unchanged.

64. UNDCP has been fully engaged in the effort currently under way to bring drug control issues squarely within the donor-endorsed common programming process through system-wide support for "a positive conditionality" in the narcotics-producing provinces of Afghanistan. This approach builds upon key recommendations of donor countries following the meeting of the Afghanistan Support Group in London in May 1998.

65. In line with instructions issued by Headquarters, all United Nations international staff was evacuated from Afghanistan after 22 August 1998. Despite the uninterrupted efforts of UNDCP's national staff still operating inside Afghanistan, this development will clearly affect the implementation of programme activities.

Plans and issues for the future

66. Elimination of opium poppy cultivation, drug trafficking and drug abuse in Afghanistan remains a long-term objective that UNDCP will continue to address in 1999. In tackling those three elements of the drug problem in Afghanistan, UNDCP will follow a two-pronged approach: first by emphasizing community participation; and secondly by identifying the potential for cooperation with the Taliban authorities in drug control efforts.

67. With regard to the elimination of illicit cultivation and the reduction of drug abuse, current conditions force the aid community to address the causes of the drug problem primarily through community participation. This approach will first be implemented in the target areas of the ongoing UNDCP pilot programme in Nangarhar and Qandahar Provinces through the promotion of opportunities for self-employment and small-scale commercial enterprises, training programmes for women in basic family health and livestock production. A comprehensive demand reduction programme will be implemented. In addition, UNDCP support will be provided to international aid agencies working in other opium poppy-growing areas through common programming.

68. As foreseen in the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan, UNDCP will finalize a practical and workable policy on drug control as well as a set of standards and benchmarks against which to measure progress and compliance in the area of drug control. UNDCP will improve inter-agency collaboration in order to incorporate drugs as a cross-cutting issue within the five thematic objectives of the Strategic Framework and to ensure programmatic coherence. This new approach, which will be part of a common consolidated alternative development framework, will require a common planning process, better coordination and communication between aid organizations and a monitoring mechanism to ensure progress in opium poppy elimination.

IX. OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

69. Afghanistan, once a flashpoint of superpower rivalry, has now become the stage for a new, regional version of the "Great Game", in which the domestic, economic and national security interests of Afghanistan's neighbours and their supporters are played out. A vicious cycle has developed in which the inability of the Afghan factions to agree to a political settlement is both the cause and the effect of persistent outside interference in the affairs of Afghanistan.

70. In the last few months, the military victories scored by one of the factions have brought about a new phase in the long Afghan saga. As at September 1998, the Taliban has taken control of most of the country and UF, with the significant exception of the fighters under the command of Ahmed Shah Massoud, appear to have been largely eliminated as a viable fighting force, at least for the moment. However, a political solution still remains elusive. If anything, the success of the Taliban on the battlefield appears to have reduced the willingness of some parties to negotiate further and has also increased the prospect of a deeper regionalization of the conflict.

71. Although I remain convinced that a durable settlement can be achieved only through a ceasefire and the start of a political dialogue among Afghans leading to national reconciliation and the establishment of a genuinely broad-based, multi-ethnic and representative government, and while both my Special Envoy and UNSMA will continue to promote these objectives, it is clear that these goals cannot be attained without a concerted effort by all the outside powers concerned. The six plus two group of countries has provided a useful forum in which to discuss the Afghan issue. I am, however, somewhat disappointed by the failure of some of those countries to narrow their differences and to cease supplying the weapons and other war matériel that fuel the conflict in Afghanistan. While I appreciate that they have legitimate interests to protect in Afghanistan, I find it paradoxical that, instead of genuinely promoting the establishment of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, these countries continue their clandestine military support for their favoured Afghan factions, despite their professed recognition that the prolongation of the conflict poses a threat to their own stability.

72. I welcome the success of my Special Envoy in defusing a possible military confrontation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Taliban during his recent visit to the region, following the shocking murder of the Iranian diplomats and the journalist in Mazar-i-Sharif in August 1998. It is my sincere hope my Special Envoy's achievements will continue to be built upon, inter alia, by prosecuting those responsible for the murders and releasing any remaining Iranian prisoners. It is essential for the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Taliban to open a bilateral dialogue at an early date with a view to a further reduction of tensions, particularly along the border. The United Nations, in close cooperation with OIC, will continue to foster such a dialogue.

73. While its achievements to date may be modest, I will continue to convene informal meetings of the six plus two group. At this juncture, a promising development is the proposed ministerial meeting of the group at Tashkent, which, I believe, should be convened after adequate preparation and with the

participation of all major Afghan factions. I shall also continue to consult with the Group of 21 countries with influence in Afghanistan, which constitutes an indispensable complement to the six plus two group.

74. My Special Envoy will continue to play the primary role in conducting the United Nations peacemaking activities in Afghanistan. UNSMA will continue to support my Special Envoy's good offices, monitor the overall political and military situation in Afghanistan and maintain and strengthen contacts with all Afghan factions, in particular the Taliban authorities, as well as with all other interested parties and organizations, including neighbouring States and others concerned about the situation in Afghanistan.

75. Reports of mass killings and other forms of gross violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in Afghanistan have become a major source of concern to the international community at large and to the United Nations in particular. It is therefore my intention, with the consent of the Taliban and other relevant Afghan authorities, to add a new monitoring function to UNSMA, with the primary objective of promoting respect for minimum humanitarian standards and deterring massive and systematic violations of human rights in the future. To this end, I propose to establish a separate civil affairs unit, initially composed of 12 monitors who, security conditions permitting, would be deployed in major centres in Afghanistan. Their exact location, mandate and functioning would be determined following the return of an assessment team, which I intend to dispatch to Afghanistan at an early date, with the agreement of the Afghan authorities. In this connection, I am including preliminary provisions in the forthcoming report on the proposed 1999 programme budget for UNSMA, which will include its new staffing table and other pertinent details.

76. In the months to come, I will be looking to UNSMA and to all United Nations funds and programmes, in particular UNOCHA, to further strengthen their coordination in the context of the strategic framework for Afghanistan, a process which I follow with great interest. It is my strong hope that United Nations staff members working for all these entities will shortly be able to return to Afghanistan. But before this can happen, it will be necessary for the Taliban authorities to furnish the information that has been requested so often of them regarding the recent murders of United Nations international and local staff, as well as to provide credible assurances that the United Nations agencies will be able to carry out their vital humanitarian work free from the obstacles and harassment they have regrettably faced in the past. In this connection, I should like to salute the courage and perseverance of the United Nations staff members who have been working in Afghanistan under such dangerous and discouraging conditions.

77. I shall continue to keep the General Assembly and the Security Council periodically informed about developments relevant to the search for a negotiated and lasting solution in Afghanistan and the progress achieved in furthering a common approach among the six plus two group countries. I should not like to conclude the present report without acknowledging the work of my Special Envoy, Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi, whose diplomatic wisdom and political experience have been invaluable in the efforts to move the peace process forward in Afghanistan. I

also wish to pay tribute to all the staff members of UNSMA and to its Acting Head, Mr. James Ngobi, who will be leaving the Mission at the end of this year, for their commitment to the search for peace in Afghanistan, the cause for which UNSMA's Military Adviser, Lt. Col. Calo, as well as Mr. Mohammad Nazir Habibi of UNHCR and Mr. Mohammad Hushim Bashayar of WFP, whose deaths we mourn, gave their lives.